

Press reports on Killing of Nandigram peasants

The Statesman

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Cops take their toll on Nandigram

Sukanta Goswamy

Nandigram, March 14: At least 20 people fell to police bullets and more than 60 others, including 14 police personnel, were injured in the bloodiest ever clash between police and supporters of anti-land acquisition movement at violence-scarred Nandigram today. Trouble erupted when police tried to enter strife-torn Nandigram.

In a virtual indictment of the state government for the police firing Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi today said the use of force against the villagers could have been avoided. "Was this spilling of human blood not avoidable? What I advised government over the last two days, as I received inputs of rising tension in Nandigram, government knows. It is not my intention to enter into blame-fixing. But I cannot be so casual to the oath I have taken as to restrict my reaction to a pious expression of anguish and outrage.. But I also expect the government to do what it thinks is necessary to mitigate the effects of this bitter 14 March," he said.

The Trinamul, Congress and Suci have given a call for a 12-hour bandh on Friday in protest against the killings, while Left Front partners condemned the police action. The Higher Secondary Council has postponed HS exams scheduled for Friday to 18 April. The chief minister told waiting journalists: "You would hear about it tomorrow."

The four deceased have been identified as Ratan Das (28) from Gangra, Imadul Khan (24) and Gobinda Das (22), residents of Saat Nambar Jalpai and Supriya Jana (39) from Sonachura village. Sambhu Das (33) from Sonachura village later died in hospital. All had died from bullet injuries. At least 46 people were taken to Nandigram Block Hospital, while the critically injured were sent to Tamluk Sadar Hospital. Five of the critically injured ~ Rasbehari Khara, Abhijeet Samanto, Swapan Giri and two women, Haimabati Haldar and Kanchan Mal ~ are being treated at SSKM Hospital in Kolkata.

Miss Mamata Banerjee has said she will be visiting the injured at the Nandigram hospital tomorrow. According to the Bhumi Uched Protirodh Committee, nearly 20 people have gone missing after the violence.

Trouble started soon after a police contingent tried to enter Sonachura, Gangra and Saat Nambar Jalpai areas of Nandigram from Tekhali-Bhangabera end around 10 a.m. The agitating farmers formed a human shield with their womenfolk. They had assembled in front of the Singhabahini temple to seek blessings. Witnesses said there was some resistance by the villagers who started throwing stones at police. Police retaliated by firing teargas shells and then resorted to "indiscriminate firing", eye-witnesses said.

Abu Taher, member of the committee, alleged that CPI-M goons, using police as cover, fired at the villagers without any provocation. The CPI-M state secretary, Mr Biman Bose, denied the allegation. Tapasi Das, a resident of Gokulnagar who was injured, said : "Armed CPI-M cadres entered the village close on the heels of the police and went on the rampage." According to Mr N Ramesh Babu, DIG Midnapore range, there was a large gathering when police tried to enter the area. "Before opening fire we urged the villagers to lift the blockade. When the mob didn't disperse, we fired teargas shells. But the villagers retaliated by throwing bombs at us and we had to open fire," he said. Finding the villages deserted CPI-M supporters allegedly looted houses and shops. Villagers alleged that at least five women protestors were raped by CPI-M goons. BUPC members complained a few bodies were dragged towards Khejuri and some were thrown into the Hooghly river by CPI-M cadres.

<http://www.thestatesman.net/page.arcview.php?date=2007-03-15&usrsess=1&clid=1&id=177086>

The Brigade connection

Uday Basu

KOLKATA, March 14: The second instalment of deaths at Nandigram today once again showed what a political novice can understand is beyond the ken of the muddle-headed Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee-government. The industrialisation hype has so much clouded the vision of the Marxists that they are now incapable of thinking of even the basics. The seeds of today's mayhem at Nandigram were actually sown at the Brigade Parade Ground on 12 March when the two 'B's marshalling the forces for implementing industrialisation through acquiring farm land ~ Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and Mr Benoy Konar, Alimuddin Street's backroom player ~ threatened that the state of affairs at Nandigram "won't be tolerated any longer". The chief minister blew hot and cold at the CPI-M peasant wing's rally, while Mr Konar used the uncouth language that the "nose" of the opponents of the farm land acquisition policy would be "rubbed down the drains." Mr Konar even said his party had, so long, showed restraint at Nandigram and didn't finish his sentence which was completed today when bullets from police rifles flew thick and fast to snuff out lives that wouldn't have in any case survived if they were forced to part with their land. The chief minister sounded unusually belligerent at the Brigade which was a tell-tale indication of the change in the CPI-M's thinking.

First, the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee administration set Nandigram on fire by craftily letting the Haldia Development Authority slap a notice on acquisition of farm land for the mega chemical hub project. Then fierce resistance forced Mr Bhattacharjee to retreat and he ordered "tearing" up the notice. Since then he went on harping that no land would be acquired without the farmers' consent. The change of tack seemed to have convinced the Marxists that it was a sign of weakness. Then suddenly at Brigade they went on the offensive to show they are not weaklings and won't yield an inch of political space to the Opposition.

What went wrong at Nandigram was the mistake that it was a law and order problem to be tackled with police and armed CPI-M cadres, while the real problem is dispossessing the have-nots of the little land they have. And the prospect of going without food in the absence of land gives the poor incredible fire power.

<http://www.thestatesman.net/page.arcview.php?date=2007-03-15&usrsess=1&clid=1&id=177087>

Healing touch, shaky hand

Uday Basu

TAMLUK (East Midnapore), March 15: Sixteen-year-old Saddam Hossain lay on the hospital bed here today with his eyes bandaged as a tear gas shell had burst on his eyes when he thought he was safe behind columns of hundreds of men and women at Bhangaberi, Nandigram, yesterday. He couldn't get up, but the Governor, Mr Gopal Krishna Gandhi's milk of human kindness this morning gave him a ray of hope. Seeing him in school uniform as he groaned in pain on the hospital bed, the Governor touched his hand and asked him what class he read in and how he had got injured. "The Governor told me: 'Don't worry. There is no media here. What I say now is for your ears only. You will soon get well and can resume your studies'. I asked him how I can continue my studies if they take away our six bighas of land that supports our family and my father gets money from for paying for my studies. He told me 'Don't worry. Everything will be all right. I am looking into it'," Saddam said as his elder brother Mizanur stood with his jaws clenched with determination. "The bullets fired by the brutal police can't break our will, they have redoubled our strength. They can take our land over our bodies only," he said. The Governor stayed at the Tamluk State District Hospital for over an hour, talked to the injured villagers of Nandigram being treated there. He was so moved by the sight of women in tattered saris bearing marks of police brutality that he immediately instructed the medical staff not to spare any pains to give succour to the injured.

He told waiting journalists at the hospital that he had seen with his own eyes "the severe pain they are in." "My first concern is that the injured get immediate treatment as some of them need brain scan, some have bullet injuries, while others need to be shifted to better equipped hospitals. I told the medical staff there mustn't be any slackness in the treatment. I asked them whether the infrastructure here is adequate, to get the injuries scanned wherever needed and provide all treatment free," Mr Gandhi said. Asked about the political implication of the situation, the Governor told the media: "Please understand my position. My utmost worry is the recovery of the injured... What has happened is not good for anyone."

The Governor's words had a telling effect. There was a flurry of activity as the hospital staff checked each case, referred eight of the critically injured to hospitals in Kolkata and contacted eye specialists for treating three whose eyes were damaged.

Banashree Acharya had her hip punctured by a bullet as she tried to flee after police “indiscriminately” fired on them. “The Governor asked my name and I told him how I had felt a searing pain, tumbled down on the field and became unconscious,” she said. She could immediately hear the Governor talking to the doctors in a stern voice, but couldn’t make out the words. “When I opened my eyes I found myself at Nandigram hospital from where I was shifted here late last night,” she said in a feeble voice.

Her brother-in-law, Gurupada, said they were landless labourers and owned a hut. “If they take away land, where will we live and how will we get our daily bread ?” he asked. Kanaklata Das was still traumatised by the speed with which the “brutality” unfolded. “We were there attending a puja being organised to get God’s blessings to prevent the land-grabbers from uprooting us. Suddenly they fired teargas shells. I ran to get water to sprinkle into my burning eyes. But I tripped and lathis rained on my shoulder, arm and back,” she said showing the swollen limbs that bore tell-tale marks of police savagery. How did it all happen ?

Gopal Das of Sonachura, who had a bullet perforating his left shoulder, graphically narrated the sequence of events. “The womenfolk and us were near the temple when we heard vehicles trundling in. We thought the police vans and the buses carried reinforcements as they had been doing at the time of shifting of duties for the patrolling contingents for the past two months. But we became suspicious when we saw men in black dresses,” he said.

The villagers, according to him, asked policemen to leave the place and go to Khejuri as they were “peacefully” organising resistance in their area. “The police officers asked us whether they would act as per our instructions and then fired teargas shells. Bombs were also hurled from behind them,” Gopal said.

Bhabani Giri had bullet injures on her chest. She was all skin and bone and was so weak that she could hardly speak. “The Governor asked my name and how I was feeling, but I couldn’t say anything, as I was still in pain,” she said.

Dr AK Shee, attending to the patients, said 32 injured were admitted to the hospital and one of them succumbed to his injuries. Eight of the injured were referred to SSKM Hospital. Of the 28 injured, nine had to be operated on for “various types of wounds, including bullet injuries,” Dr Shee said.

<http://www.thestatesman.net/page.arcview.php?date=2007-03-16&usrsess=1&clid=1&id=177201>

THE TELEGRAPH

SHOOT-TO-KILL SHOCKER One bullet for every four

SIMI KAMBOJ AND IMRAN AHMED SIDDIQUI

March 16: Bullet marks on those gunned down in Nandigram suggest police “lost their head” and shot to kill, flouting guidelines for controlling and dispersing mobs, senior officials conceded today.

All the 14 confirmed killed had been shot either in the chest or in the stomach, and a woman was hit in the back, a list compiled by **The Telegraph** shows (**see chart below**).

The seven unidentified bodies are that of six men and a woman, aged between 20 and 30 — all with bullet injuries in the stomach or in the chest.

A preliminary probe carried out by the state police has shown that between 400 and 500 rounds were fired to disperse a group of around 2,000 people assembled at the Bhangabera bridge on Wednesday morning.

The cold statistic translates into one bullet for every four persons, an “astronomical figure”, according to veteran officers.

“The police guidelines clearly state the purpose of firing is to disperse the crowd and not to kill,” a senior police official said. “The term that we use is ‘controlled firing’ — to deter and disperse the crowd.”

Quoting from the manual, an official said the police can open fire only if baton-charge fails and non-lethal options like tear gas shells and rubber bullets are exhausted.

“The guidelines state that you have to hit one person in the leg if the situation becomes violent and then watch to see if the crowd is deterred,” an official said. “If the situation still does not improve, some more people should be shot at, but always in the leg where the possibility of death is minimal.”

All the 10 bullet-hit patients admitted to Calcutta’s SSKM hospital have been struck above the waist. Many of the 23 patients with bullet injuries in the Tamluk and Nandigram hospitals have also been hit above the waist.

TELLTALE LIST

Seven bodies identified so far and the wounds

- Supriya Jana (40): shot in the back
- Gobinda Das (17): chest wound
- Sheikh Raja (18): chest injury
- Imadul Khan (18): injury in solar plexus and right arm
- Ratan Das (24): stomach wound
- Sambhu Pal (28): injury in stomach
- Pralay Giri (30): chest injury

Even the non-lethal options were not used as they should have been. Allowing modern tools of crowd management to idle, the police lobbed metal-cased tear gas shells.

Such shells, with a limited range of less than 100 metres, force the police to go closer to the crowd — a recipe for snapping taut nerves and triggering panic reactions on both sides. Besides, the flaming-hot shells themselves can cause grievous injuries if they make body contact, unlike smoke grenades whose plastic canisters melt during explosion.

Bhumi Jana, the husband of Supriya who was shot in the back, said: “My wife was not trying to harm the police, she was simply trying to run away in fear and they shot her in the back, the bullet pierced her heart and she died.”

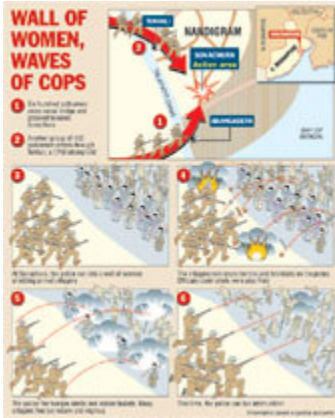
The officers **The Telegraph** spoke to said “something must have gone wrong” for the police to have fired with “such vengeance”. “It all seemed pretty indiscriminate,” said a senior official. “It seems that the leadership must have lost control over their men who shot deliberately to kill.”

Sheikh Raja’s brother-in-law Shamsher Khan, too, believes that the 18-year-old, who was to have appeared for the Higher Secondary exams in a few days, had been deliberately killed by a “police gone mad”.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070317/asp/frontpage/story_7528177.asp#

Red-hand Buddha

14 killed in Nandigram re-entry bid OUR BUREAU



March 14: The Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government's armed attempt to reclaim Nandigram ran into waves of resistance fronted by women, leading to the deaths of at least 14 people in police firing.

The police succeeded in entering Nandigram, which villagers opposed to land acquisition had turned into a no-entry zone for the administration for over two months, but left deep bloodstains on the chief minister's industrialisation campaign.

The police action also gave Mamata Banerjee an opportunity to call a 12-hour Bengal bandh on Friday, disrupting examination schedules.

The killings drew widespread condemnation, including a grim statement from governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi that "the news has filled me with a sense of cold horror". "What is the public purpose served by the use of force that we have witnessed today?" he asked.

A huge contingent of police, amassed over the last few days, mounted the mission to recapture Nandigram around 10 am today.

Over 1,000 policemen, split into two groups, raced towards Sonachura — the theatre of the main battle, around 170 km from Calcutta — from two flanks . A 2,000-strong reserve force stood by, waiting to move in once the advance party smashed its way through the hurdles.

However, one of the thrust arms came face to face with a wall of 400-500 women, behind whom stood around 2,000 villagers armed with spears, rods, lathis and scythes. Pipe guns, muskets and country-made pistols were also in the arsenal.

A convoy of officials and labourers with excavators, road-rollers and sandbags trailed the police. One of the objectives of the raid was to repair roads dug up by villagers, the ditch becoming a symbol of protest against land acquisition. A bomb squad and ambulances made up the rest of the caravan.

With the force advancing, a chant rose from the villagers, asking the police to “go back”.

The police, led by deputy inspector-general (Midnapore range) N. Ramesh Babu, told the villagers over the public address system to move back but were greeted by crude bombs and brickbats. Sound of shots was also heard.



Teargas shells were burst and rubber bullets fired but the villagers regrouped and surged back, this time without the chain of women shielding them.

The police then opened fire, using live ammunition. “We found the teargas and rubber bullets had little impact on the aggressive villagers. They fled but regrouped and started firing at us. We had no alternative but to open fire,” an officer said.

Besides the fatalities, at least 75 people were injured — among them a dozen policemen. The number of the dead fluctuated through the day — ranging from six to 20 — but there was no official word till the evening. Chief minister Bhattacharjee reached the Assembly to make a statement, without realising that the House had adjourned five minutes ago. “Whatever I have to say, I will say it in the Assembly tomorrow,” he said later. The onus fell on home secretary Prasad Ranjan Ray to confirm 11 deaths. Late tonight, East Midnapore district magistrate Anup Agarwal put the toll at 14 and other officials said the figure could rise.

Ward master of the Tamluk hospital, Atal Behari Jana, said 11 bodies, including that of a woman, bore bullet injuries. Most injuries were either in the stomach or chest.

“The police had to open fire in self-defence. Our force had guns not to fight the enemy but to restore peace in Nandigram,” director-general of police A.B. Vohra said.

The stated goals — regaining control of Nandigram and ensuring the return of CPM families that fled in January — were only partially met till late this evening. The police have established their writ in four of the six villages and a part of Sonachura but the CPM supporters are yet to return.

After calling the bandh, Mamata proceeded towards Nandigram but was blocked by CPM supporters. Long-distance private buses were parked diagonally on the road.

<http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>